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ARTICLE V.

ON A KAREN INSCRIPTION-PLATE.

BY REV. ALONZO BUNKER,
MISSIONARY OF THE A. B. M. U. IN FARTHER INDIA.

Presented to the Society October 20th, 1870.

THE story of my visit to Karenee, and the circumstances attending the copying of the Plate, are briefly as follows:

Karenee is east from Toungoo twelve hard days' journey. It lies on the Salwen river, and is divided into Eastern and Western Karenee, each ruled by its own chief. Its natural scenery is most interesting to the traveller.

I left Toungoo near the close of 1868, and joined Rev. J. B. Vinton, of the Rangoon Mission, at Shwaygheen. We travelled east to the Salwen river, and then north to the village of Kai-pho-gyee, the chief of Western Karenee. From Shwaygheen to the Salwen is about seven days, and from thence to Kai-pho-gyee's village is about seven more, but we were nearly twenty days on the road, owing to the disturbed state of the country from roaming bands of robbers. We had sent to ask permission to enter Eastern Karenee, but were refused.

Among the objects of our journey, not the least was to obtain a sight, and if possible a copy, of the famous Plate. But though we were received most cordially by the chief, yet we soon found that this part of our mission would not be accomplished without difficulty. We discovered that the Plate, with other things of a strange character in the eyes of the natives, constituted in fact the talisman by which the chief held his power over the people.

With reference to the origin of the Plate we made careful inquiries; but, so far as I have been able to learn, the Karenees do not hold the same traditions concerning it as the Sgau and Bghai tribes; yet I cannot speak positively respecting the point.*

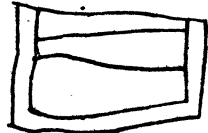
* The tradition of the Red Karens, or Eastern Bghais, in which the inscription-plate here treated of plays a part, is given as follows by Rev. E. B. Cross, in a paper on the Karens and their language (see the Society's Proceedings for October, 1866, or Journal, vol. ix., pp. xi.-xii.):

1.

Handwritten Karen script, likely a religious or historical inscription, consisting of approximately 10 lines of text in a cursive style.

2.

Handwritten Karen script, continuing the inscription, consisting of approximately 5 lines of text.



To all our inquiries, "where did you get this Plate?" they reply, "it has descended to us from father to son, in the line of chiefs, from most ancient days;" yet sometimes they profess to believe that it came from a supreme and supernatural being; that they formerly were able to read it, but soon lost the art. I hope in a future trip to learn what traditions are really held by them concerning it, as well as concerning their own origin.

The fact that the Plate invests its possessor, the chief, with what authority he holds over his subjects, is owing to the superstition of the people. They believe that it has life; that it possesses the power of giving and taking life, of producing famine or of giving plenty. They also believe that if one ventures to look upon it, he will be blinded by it. The chief, whether he joins in the popular belief or not, finds it profitable to keep up the delusion, both as it guards his power, and as it brings him a revenue. The people, attributing to it such power as they do, are accustomed to assemble once a year from all parts of the nation, to propitiate it with offerings. The gathering of the people takes place in the month of March, and is with them the great feast-day. Every one brings offerings, according to his free will; but as the Plate is thought to have an especial fondness for silver coin, such coin is the chief offering made to it. This yields quite a revenue to the chief.

"In earliest and most ancient times, we came from the West. We came in company with the Chinese. The Chinese were our elder brothers. Our elder brothers, the Chinese, went in a company in advance, and we in a company followed them. The Chinese company advanced more rapidly than we did, and thus left us behind, and we became separated; and the separation gradually increased between us.

"Under these circumstances, we came upon a stream or river where there were abundance of shell-fish [*cerithidia*]. We stopped to boil and eat the shell-fish. We boiled them, but they remained hard. We boiled them still more, but still they remained hard. Upon this we went to our elder brothers, the Chinese, and observed how they cooked the fish. We saw that they boiled them till they were cooked, and then broke the shells and ate them. We returned and did the same, and then followed after our brothers. We followed, but we no more overtook them. We continued to follow until we came upon the place where our Chinese brothers had left us a bridle-bit, and a sickle, to cut food for a horse, and a book written on a plate of brass and gold, which was shining black. It was only a part of the plate. We therefore said among ourselves, 'now our elder brothers have determined not to wait for us any longer. They have given us, and left for us, our inheritance, that which we were to receive.'

"When this was done, we made no more attempts to follow our brothers. We stopped and made us cities and villages, and our palace, in the country and place where the city of Ava now is. The name of the city in which was our king's palace was called *Hotailai*, or 'gold and silver city.'

"After we had been there a long time, a Burmese people called *Kathai*, who were in the West, came after us, and fought with us, and utterly destroyed our palace, our cities, and our villages. We then fled and built again our villages and cities and palace in the land of Kyeelya, where we now are, and where we have ever since remained."

In the Sgau or Tavoy tradition, as reported also by Mr. Cross, the Chinese are declared "younger brothers," and there is a similar story about cooking the shell-fish, but no mention of a "book" or plate. COMM. OF PUBL.

At these yearly gatherings, the Plate is placed on a dish on a high altar, and shares a large part of the honors of the feast. Bullocks, goats, fowls, etc., are killed, and bits of all are heaped up around the dish on the altar. At this time the multitude bring their offerings of silver, and place them in the dish with the Plate, carefully avoiding a glance at it.

On account of these superstitions, we found that we had much to overcome before we could gain a sight of the Plate. However, a few days of careful diplomacy secured the consent of the chief and head-men, and one day about noon a messenger came to conduct us to the house where it was guarded. We must carry money to feed it, and we must take all the risk of being smitten by it, because of our rashness, if it should be angry; which we joyfully did. About 75 cents in silver coin was thought to be sufficient to satisfy it for that time. We were also to leave all our followers behind. Only the two "white men" would be allowed to enter. We were allowed to take pencils and paper. A few moments' walk brought us to a strongly fortified inclosure, where stood the palace of old King Kai-pho-gyee, who had died a few months before our arrival. We were conducted to the rear of the house, where, by a flight of steps, we ascended a high walled veranda. Here, in a semicircle, were seated the sons of the late king, in company with the chief men; and before them lay the metal Plate on an ordinary dinner-plate. Beside it lay a stout canvas bag, made to hold it, about three feet in length. Two pillows were placed for us to sit upon. We were allowed to take the Plate in our hands, but were forbidden to press or close the hand upon it; and although we had prepared wax, yet they would not permit us to take an impression of it. They granted us permission, however, to make a copy, and we set about our work, each for himself. We copied it throughout without reference to each other's work, in order that we might test our copies for accuracy after they were made. We had no want of light, as the Plate lay in the fierce glare of a noon-day sun. While we were thus engaged, the keeper of the Plate, the wife of the deceased king, was occupied in chanting before the Nat who had the Plate in especial charge, in order to distract his attention from what was going on, lest he should be angry. We were thrown into some anxiety on this account, as she alternately chanted her prayer, and then came out to reproach us for being so long in our examination.

The character is so complex that we found it difficult to make our copy, and the operation necessarily took some time. However, we completed the copy without serious interruption, the chiefs maintaining a complete silence till we were through.

On comparing our copies we found that they were very nearly correct. We also were able to compare them with the original now that we were sure of them. I inclose the original copy as made by myself. No. 1 is the front and No. 2 the reverse side.*

I aimed to give every mark, however trifling, even what appeared to me to be slips of the chisel in the engraver's hand, and each stroke in its proper proportion. The first copy was made with a pencil, and traced with ink directly on my return.

The engraved lines were bold and deep-cut, as I have endeavored to show in the copy. The strokes of the chisel formed a cut with a base more like two right angles than an acute angle. The letters were engraved very near to the edge of the Plate all around, and might give one the impression, on a hasty look, that the Plate had been divided, but I saw no reason for such a supposition, and I examined it carefully with this in view.

The Plate was evidently very old, as it showed signs of wear. Some letters were filled up with much handling, but owing to the color of the metal the form of the letters was in almost every instance readily made out.

The size of the Plate by actual measurement is—length $6\frac{3}{8}$ inches, width $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches, thickness about $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch, but not uniform. As to its composition I cannot pronounce with confidence, as we were not allowed to examine it by any test. There are, however, two kinds of metal in it, without doubt. These two metals were first made into plates and then united by welding, not face to face but by their edges. This is the appearance the Plate presents. The line of union is irregular, at times almost disappearing in the perfect union of the metals. The first half of the Plate is dark copper color, but the other half is a much lighter yellow, and I am not sure that it is not gold. I could not tell much by weight as a test, yet it seemed to me at the time to be too heavy for copper, or a composition of any metal having the specific gravity of copper; but I cannot speak with confidence in this matter.

I have examined a list of the alphabets of the East, and while this character resembles none to which I have access, yet it has forms common to a number. The Siamese character for *h* is repeated a number of times. A Hebrew letter occurs here and there. Some forms or parts of whole letters resemble Burmese characters: and so on. The division or apparent division of sentences is unlike any system with which I am acquainted. The Burmese system is couplets of short parallel bars before and after a sentence, while this appears to be a single or double cross at the close of a sentence.

* See the appended lithograph.

Further than this I have no light. It may be well to add, that accounts of shell-fish similar to those represented on the Plate enter largely into those traditions of the Karens which relate to their early travels: which fact is a little curious, to say the least.*

Minlouns, or supernatural characters, or rather those supposed by the ignorant Karens to have supernatural powers, have appeared from time to time, and it has been conjectured that some such character, in order to impose upon the Karens and acquire power over them, has devised this plan, and that the Plate is a mere medley of characters, sufficient to inspire awe in the ignorant mind, and having no real meaning in themselves. This may be the fact; but, if it is so, it is beyond the memory of any living Karen, nor do they have any tradition which would favor this suspicion. Rather tradition would seem to point to it as of ancient origin.

It might be well to remark, also, that this tribe seems to be the oldest tribe of Karens known, as they are by far the most civilized. Their works for irrigation, and the changes in the face of the country by agriculture, show this to be true also. Every thing in their country tends to produce the impression on the mind of the traveller that he is among a comparatively old people, who have occupied their position for some length of years.

With reference to the ivory plates,† I may say that I have little doubt of their existence at the same place. In fact, a descendant of the chief who is now with me tells me that such plates are in existence. How many they are or what their character I am unable to find out. The present chief denied having any more plates, but probably from fear that we should ask for a sight of them also. There are also other books, of palm leaf, which I think are of a modern date, perhaps in the Burmese character. I expect to visit the country again next season, and if possible shall get an impression of the Plate in question, and a sight of such other writings or engravings as may be in the keeping of this chief.

If any further particulars are desired which I can give I shall be happy to furnish them. In the meantime, if any progress is made in deciphering this inscription, I shall be glad to be made acquainted with the results.

* See the note to p. 172, above.

† The ivory plates here referred to are thus mentioned by Mr. Cross:

"Rev. Quala also states that the Red Karen king, Kai-pho-gyee, who holds this plate, has also in his possession five ivory plates, in shape and size about like the ordinary Burmese palm-leaf—that is to say, each plate is about two feet in length, and two and a half inches in width. These ivory plates are covered with the same characters as the metal plate already mentioned."